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ABSTRACT

Communication researchers have studied the role of the change agent -- the professional helper who stimulates change at the individual, group, organizational, or community level. Few recognize, however, that the change agent is a member of a formal organization whose norms and values often diverge from those of the clientele system. This paper attempts to conceptualize the nature of communication between two systems whose norms and values diverge from one another and to determine the possible effects such communication can achieve. The concepts developed are applied to the problem of auditing the effectiveness of an organization's communication with its clientele. Research evidence from studies conducted in Colombia show the importance of the organization in determining the behavior of change agents. Evidence is presented to show the nature of communication between organization and clientele by anti-poverty agencies in the United States and the nature of inter-organizational communication within a community. Finally, a theory of inter-system communication is developed and concepts and measuring devices are presented for auditing the effectiveness of extra-organizational communication. (Author/JK)

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ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL ACTION

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Communication researchers have long been interested in the role of the change agent--the professional helper who stimulates change at the individual, group, organizational, or community level. Few recognize, however, that the change agent is a member of a formal organization whose norms and values often diverge from those of the clientele system. The purpose of this paper is to conceptualize the nature of communication between two systems whose norms and values diverge from one another and to determine the possible effects such communication can achieve. The concepts developed are then applied to the problem of auditing the effectiveness of an organization's communication with its clientele. Although the evidence presented is drawn from studies of governmental and other agencies dealing with a low-income clientele, the implications should extend to any extra-organizational communication--such as public relations, labor relations, or marketing--with a public or clientele with interests divergent from those of the organization.

Research evidence is presented from studies conducted by the author and others in Colombia to show the importance of the organization in determining the behavior of change agents. Evidence is then presented to show the nature of organization-clientele communication by anti-poverty agencies in the United States and the nature of inter-organizational communication within a community. Finally, a theory of inter-system communication is developed and concepts and measuring devices are presented for auditing the effectiveness of extra-organizational communication. Effectiveness is defined as the amount of learning the organization does from its clientele.

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Americans have long been concerned with the fate of the disadvantaged and the poverty stricken. Social scientists have reflected this concern by studying means of stimulating individual and social changes that would improve the lot of the disadvantaged. Communications scholars have been at the forefront of this research, since communication has generally been assumed to be a necessary if not sufficient condition for change.

Rural sociolists were the first to study social action--in an effort to stimulate the diffusion of innovations in rural communities. (see, eg., Lionberger, 1960; Rogers, 1962) Other social action studies concerned charity drives, school bond issues, and hospital construction, among others. During the late 1950's and the 1960's great emphasis was placed on stimulating change in underdeveloped countries. And with the Great Society came concern for domestic anti-poverty efforts.

A common concept in most social action research has been the change agent, the professional helper who stimulates change at the individual, group, organizational, or community level (Lippitt et al., 1958). Usually such research yields a series of steps that the change agent should take if he is to be successful (e.g, Bettinghaus, 1968, Ch. 11) or for the training of change agents (Lippitt et al., 1958, Ch. 11). Most studies conclude that the change agent can only help the client system to recognize its problems and help it to channel and process information relevant to those problems (Westley, 1966, 1970).

What has occurred to few people, however, is that a change agent is

almost always a member of a formal organization--be it an agricultural extension agency, economic development agency, or anti-poverty or community action agency. These organizations are themselves social systems with roles, norms, values, and communication channels that influence the behavior of the change agent. Seldom, then, is he capable of being the disinterested, empathic individual that change agent research shows he must be. Quite frequently he is the product of a system with norms and values that diverge from those of the clientele system. Rarely, therefore, is he able to effect a lasting change within that clientele system.

My purpose here will be to conceptualize the nature of communication between two systems--in this case a formal organization and its clientele--and the possible effects that such communication can achieve. Given an understanding of these effects we should be able to audit the effectiveness of an organization's communication with its clientele. Although the evidence presented here will be drawn from studies of communication with a low-income clientele, the implications should extend to any extra-organizational communication--such as public relations, labor relations, or marketing--to a public or clientele with interests divergent from those of the organization.

The Importance of the Organization

Five years ago I began a two-year research project in Colombia designed to determine the role of communication in the development process. My principal hypothesis was that the existing literature generated by

Daniel Lerner, Everett Rogers and many others had overstated the impact of communication on national and economic development (one type of social change). I believed communication complements structural change and does not initiate such change. If opportunities do not exist, communication cannot create them. But when structural change makes opportunities available, then communication can extend these opportunities by making more people aware of them. (Grunig, 1971).

This premise was supported empirically, first in a study of large landowners (Grunig, 1969a, 1969b) and then of peasants (Grunig, 1969c, 1971). It has also been substantiated in studies by Brown (1970), Fett (1970), and Whiting (1971). I studied the issue at the individual level using decision making and information seeking concepts. What I found was that an individual who (1) has opportunities available and (2) possesses the ability to recognize alternatives, (3) seeks information relevant to those opportunities. The majority of individuals in an underdeveloped country such as Colombia have few alternatives available; thus few of them seek information (from the mass media or social action agencies).

This research showed that a key structural block cutting off opportunities was the inability (or unwillingness) of social action agencies and the mass media to produce information situationally relevant to the clientele. Opportunitees became unbearable risks to these individuals because of the absence of relevant information.

The media and action agencies could not provide needed information

because they were always staffed by individuals from upper- and upper-middle class primary reference groups--groups with a vested interest in the status quo, a different set of values from those of the clientele, and an inability to empathize with the clientele.

Community studies by Haney (1969) and Drake (1971), both in Colombia, document this elite domination of social action agencies. Felstehausen (1971) has also compiled a good deal of evidence showing elite domination of Colombian communities.

My research resulted in recommendations for what a social action agency and its change agents should do if the clientele are to be presented with opportunites (and possibly changed as a result). But I realized that no change agent would ever take these steps because the steps were not consistent with the value systems of the formal organizations and reference groups of which the change agent was a part.

Organization-Clientele Communication by Anti-Poverty Agencies

Thus far I have presented evidence about the nature of organization-clientele communication only for an underdeveloped country. The same kind of situation is by no means rare in the United States. Several years ago Janowitz and Delany (1957) showed that administrators in upper levels of a public bureaucracy had more knowledge of the perspectives of the general citizenry and its voluntary organizations than they did of the clientele. The converse was true for lower-level bureaucrats. Given the common finding that upward communication is biased in favor of the

superior's expectations then we could conclude that the information that flows to top administrators does not adequately reflect client needs.

Lipsky's (1969) study of "street-level bureaucrats" shows that the clientele does not serve as a primary reference group for policemen, welfare workers, lower court judges and teachers. It is not that street-level bureaucrats are unresponsive, he concludes. It is that they are "responsive to constellations of reference groups which have excluded client-centered interests."

Greenberg and Dervin's (1970) review of the literature on communication by the urban poor shows that few low-income individuals mention the "caretaker" (minister, case worker, teacher, or lawyer) as a primary source of information. The reason:

> The professional caretaker and the extablishment to wnich he is attached are often viewed with suspicion and hostility. It is believed that the social service agencies simply attempt to get their clients to adjust to the status quo. The law, police, and government agencies are viewed as exploiters of the low-income community. (p. 100)

Miller et al. (1970) say social action agencies "cream the poor," i.e., choose to serve only the best-off of the low-income clientele. "Persons who make and administer organizational policy select and process applicants on the basis of how they fit their own and the organization's needs and outlook."

In a participant-observer study of three Pennsylvania cities, Pollitt (1972) found that business interests dominated community action

committees and generally thwarted community action programs. He explains the process as a group of "haves" looking down on the "have-nots" as children struggling to be like themselves. Thus the belief that the poor cannot manage their lives but need help in doing so.

In a study of the suburban Washington, D.C. jurisdiction of Montgomery County, Maryland, (Grunig, 1972), I found that community decision makers could communicate more easily with middle class opponents of low-income housing and understand the opponents demands on the political system better than they could communicate with and understand poor people. Thus, the demands of the opponents could more easily be serviced than those of the proponents.

Organizational Interaction Within a Community

Thus far this discussion has proceeded in terms of change agent-individual communication (individual to individual communication) and organization-clientele communication (organization to individual communication). But clients as individuals never exist in isolation. So we need to extend the discussion to communication of the social action agency with other organizations and social groups within a community setting.

Political scientists have accumulated an extensive body of literature on community decision making processes which is useful for our purposes here. An organization can be defined as an open system

processing inputs and distributing outputs (Katz & Kahn, 1966). Such a definition indicates that we need to know who is providing the inputs and who is receiving the outputs from a social action agency.

In the recent study mentioned above (Grunig, 1972), I traced the communication exchange between community social action agencies, business and government employers, and voluntary organizations on the question of low-income housing in the upper income suburban community of Montgomery County, Maryland. I found communication to be circular--flowing between organizations which saw the housing problem in the same way. Organizations which communicated more frequently with one another were also more likely to understand each other than organizations they did not communicate with.

The poor made few communication inputs into this decision process. Most "liberal" organizations attempting to represent the poor had difficulty organizing the poor into membership. As a result the membership of these organizations was basically white and middle class.

Understanding of the poor was also minimal. Leaders of the organizations representing the poor generally believed the poor would favor housing programs. The poor, on the other hand, were more suspicious of such programs than they were receptive.

Communication inputs into the system generally were a distortion of the needs and desires of the poor. But, as pointed out above, communication inputs from middle class groups were accurately transmitted and well understood.

At this time outputs to the poor have been minimal—efforts to provide low-cost housing have been mostly token. The shortage of housing efforts seems to have resulted from what Baratz and Bachrach (1970) call a "non-decision." In their words, a non-decision is:

> . . . a decision that results in suppression or thwarting of a latent or manifest challenge to the values or interests of the decision-maker. To be more nearly explicit, nondecision-making is a means by which demands for change in the existing allocation of benefits and privileges in the community can be suffocated before they are even voiced; or kept covert; or killed before they gain access to the relevant decision-making areas; or, failing all these things, maimed or destroyed in the decision-implementing stage of the policy process. (p. 44)

Communication, in the Montgomery County case, led to a non-decision because it substituted for action. Although communication about the need for low-income housing was circular, it was also extensive. Communication can be defined as a process of stopping during the decision process. Thus when everyone pressing for housing programs is stopped, decision makers feel no need to make a decision and implement a program.

Baratz and Bachrach used a case study of black organizations in Baltimore to demonstrate the existence of non-decisions. Prior to 1965, they say:

> The channel of communications was one-way, not two-way, from the agencies to the poor. Indeed, the agencies were a potent instrument for stifling grievances, in that "uncooperative" and "undeserving" clients could be, and probably were, denied service (force) or threatened with its denial (power).

> Nor were there other avenues for the poor to air their grievances and gain redress. The poor had no access to the newspapers or radio and TV stations, and the news media apparently saw no point in becoming self-appointed champions of the down-trodden. (pp. 69-70)

In 1966 and 1967, black leaders used conflict to gain access to "key centers of decision-making." But non-decisions kept them from becoming successful:

> Nondecisions on behalf of the white majority in the city reinforced the bias against the black poor. The latter's potential adversaries--landlords, employers, bureaucrats, politicians--often found it in their own interest to avoid being drawn into conflict, relying instead for protection of their interests upon established institutions and procedures. (p. 80)

Only when blacks gained "power resources" were they able to effectively counter competing political groups:

> . . . federal anti-poverty programs backed with federal funds and federal endorsement of the principles of maximum feasible participation have played a central role in the black drive for political access." (p. 102)

In two recent papers, Stone (1969, 1971) shows a similar non-decision making process taking place during Atlanta's urban renewal. He says (1969, p. 15):

> In the formulation and implementation of policy, officials are most responsive to those group spokesman regarded as reasonable, community-minded and trustworthy. Consequently, an advantage, especially in early involvement in policy planning, accrues to those who are known at City Hall and who can be dealt with in personal and informal terms. A group spokesman not part of the established order

> thus faces a dilemma. If there is no protest, no open display of power, then he may be ignored. If there is protest, then he runs the risk of being regarded as irresponsible.

Stone (1971, p. 52) also applies Mancur Olson's (1965) concept of small and cohesive groups vs. large and diffuse groups. Large property holders in Atlanta were small and cohesive, hence more effective in communicating their desires; people of lower socio-economic strata were large and diffuse, hence less effective.

A Theory of Inter-System Communication

Thus far, it has been shown that social action organizations have difficulty communicating with their clientele because individuals in the agencies share the values of reference groups other than the clientele. Within a community, communication inputs (information) are more readily understood and less easily ignored when they come from groups representing these reference groups than when the information comes from low-income clientele. And frequently no information at all comes from the clientele. Hence change agents within these organizations cannot really empathize with the clientele--which the agents must do if they are to help the clientele recognize its problems and if they are to provide information relevant to those problems.

The next step is to show in theoretical terms why communication between social systems with competing norms and values is so difficult and then to derive conclusions to show how to facilitate such communication.

Westley (1966, 1970, 1971) theorizes that communication has the same functions at all system levels--individual, interpersonal, group, and society. Cognitive balance theories hold that messages either change attitudes or are rejected or distorted by the attitudes. Westley believes the norms and values of a social system serve much the same functions as attitudes:

> Information from outside the system keeps it (the system) informed as to changes requiring adjustment, and such information often is carried by public communication channels. But this information must be processed to test for its congruence with existing states; if hopelessly incongruent, it will be modified to make a mutual adjustment to the existing culture. (1971, p. 738).

In other words, communication has two functions: to (1) maintain consensus or to (2) seek a new consensus. According to Westley, the roles which constitute a social system are interdependent, so that a change in one role necessitates a change in the entire system. Thus, information which contradicts existing values must either change the system or be rejected or distorted. He adds that public communications media most often serve the consensus-seeking function, interpersonal channels the consensus-maintaining function.

I prefer to call these functions the "social change" and "status quo" functions. These concepts subsume Lasswell's (1948) three functions of communication: 1) surveillance of the environment, 2) correlation of parts of society to the environment, and 3) transmission of the social heritage between generations. Schramm (1964, p. 126) shortens these to

the watchman, decision-maker and teacher functions. To me, the surveillance function is the social change function, the correlation and transmission functions, the status quo function. The correlation function maintains a status quo in the present, the transmission function extends it into the future.

Thayer (1968, p. 33) lists two "basic functions" of communication: 1) adaptation--when we are "communicated-to" by our environment "to adapt to it and maneuver our way through it" (i.e., the social change function) and 2) maintenance--when we "communicate-to some living aspect of the environment (such as a person) in such a way that we establish, maintain, exploit, or alter the relationship of that person to us" (i.e., the status quo function).

Thayer's description of these functions adds one important element to the theory here--that communication takes the form of information giving when the status quo is threatened, information seeking when social change takes place.

The concept of opinion leader fits well with this formulation, especially as re-conceptualized by Bostian (1970) and Westley (1966). Information from outside the system flows to the opinion leader. Followers seek information from the opinion leader because they expect him to have the information. He then seeks information from outside because he knows followers expect him to be informed--i.e., social change information has utility for him (Atkin, 1970). But he transmits

information, not influence (although possession of information can make him influential in another sense). He is influenced mutually by other members of the system and his function is to translate social change information to make it congruent with the values of the system (the status quo function).

Early sociologists (e.g., Cooley, 1929) thought that the consensus in a system would inevitably be completely determined in a democratic fashion. But certain individuals or groups have more authority and power than others. Consensus is developed through bargaining and trading, but only those with power resources have anything to bargain and trade. Hence consensus is generally skewed in the direction of those with the most power. This is especially true in formal organizations where a "dominant coalition" has varying degrees of power (Thompson, 1967, p. 143). Communication is often a means of consolidating power between those with similar problems, so information seldom flows to and from those with no power. We might add, though, that the ability to communicate can be a source of power.

Westley (1971, p. 727) reports that recent studies show opinion leaders to be of higher status than followers. Thus we could conclude that opinion leaders are members of and are influenced by the dominant coalition of the system. Opinion leaders monitor outside information and protect the coalition from new information damaging to the status quo. They are gatekeepers, much like media gatekeepers (see, e.g., Dimmick, 1969).

Given these functions of communication within a system, the next step is to conceptualize the nature of communication between two systems. Since any one system is an element in progressively larger systems, intersystem communication should take place much like interpersonal communication. Information flows easily between systems which have similar status quo values and only with difficulty between those with different status quo values. The amount of power one system possesses vis-a-vis another also determines the extent to which it is "communicated-to" by other systems.

In a community, for example, component systems--such as the poor--which share few problems with other component systems and which have little power generally would have difficulty making communication inputs to the community decision process. If social action agencies reflect the status quo of the larger community system, then they will have difficulty communicating to a clientele which does not reflect the status quo. To use other terms, the needs of the non-status quo group will be subjected to a non-decision.

Auditing the Effectiveness of Extra-Organizational Communication

The theory constructed above shows the inherent difficulties of communications between conflicting systems. As a result of this difficulty, social action agencies typically audit their success by determining the number of clients which they have persuaded to accept their services (which generally requires acceptance of the agencies' value systems). In essence, communication is audited in terms of the

status quo function of communications--in Thayer's terms, the extent to which the communication "establishes, maintains, exploits, or alters the relationship of that person to us."

What I will propose here is that we measure communication effectiveness in terms of the extent to which the organization exercises the social change function--social change for the organization, not for the clientele. We need to measure the extent to which the organization understands the clientele's view of what the situation is and what ought to be done about it. And in instances when the clientele does not itself understand its situation, we need to measure the extent to which the organization can think through the clientele's situation from the standpoint of the needs and values of the clientele, and then bring in new information which would help clients to better evaluate consequences facing them.

This brings us to the theme of this convention, communication and learning. Communication is most effective when it is part of a symbiotic relationship (Thayer, 1968, p. 82). This means that both the organization and its clientele must learn from each other. But the organization must learn from its clientele before the clientele can effectively learn from the organization. In Boulding's (1956, p. 28) terms: "The incoming messages only modify the outgoing messages as they succeed in modifying the image."

What we mean, in other words, is that the effectiveness of organization-clientele communication should be measured by the degree of empathy the organization has with the clientele. Chaffee and McLeod's (e.g., McLeod, 1971) studies of coorientation give us some theoretical tools for determining several concepts of empathy--accuracy, understanding, agreement. Wackman (1969) has discussed the problems of measuring coorientational accuracy (empathy). Auer (1970) has also used several standard tests to measure the empathy of advertising copywriters. Many of these tests could be applied to key communicators in a social action agency.

So far, however, this advice differs little from that conventionally given change agents. But recognition that the change agent is an integral part of an organization adds a new dimension. Perrow (1970) holds that altering the structure of an organization is a more effective means of altering the behavior of organization members than educating them would be.

The role of the communication researcher, then, is to determine the organizational structure that will best facilitate empathy with and learning from the clientele. A recent study of mine, yet unpublished, illustrates one kind of structure that facilitates communication. During the summer of 1971, I conducted a case study of the Community Development Department of Prince Georges County, Maryland--a suburb of Washington, D.C., which has substantial low-income segment. The agency

was set up to seek and administer federal anti-poverty funds. It currently has OEO and Model Cities funds, among others.

I had expected that communication within the organization would flow most readily between individuals who shared the same conception of the most important social problem which the agency should solve. I also expected that community aids working daily with the clientele would have the greatest understanding of the clientele and this understanding would decrease higher up in the organization--in line with the Janowitz and Delany (1957) findings discussed above. In other words key administrators would have the poorest conception of the social problem as seen by the clientele.

Neither of these hypotheses were supported by the data. Nearly all individuals interviewed from the organization could accurately predict the views of the clientele. And within the organization, communication flowed as often between individuals with different problem conceptions as between those with the same conceptions.

Significantly, however, there was a good deal of difference between blacks and whites in the organization. Blacks felt more congruent with the low-income clientele. Both saw the social problem in terms of symptoms--poor housing, poor services. Whites understood the poor but saw the problem differently themselves--in terms of underlying causes, employment difficulties of the poor.

Blacks also communicated more often with the clientele, believed themselves members of lower SES levels, and lived in subdivisions with a substantial low-income component. Nevertheless, within the organization communication took place as often between races as within races.

The important structural element was the mixture of races within the organization. Blacks were found at all levels, and the top administrator is a black. Whites were concentrated in administrative positions but some were found at lower levels. What happened was that individuals with different reference group attachments were mixed within the organization, forcing a mixture of communication inputs. Conflict was not non-existent, but all organization members were subjected to communication inputs representing reference groups of the clientele. This reinforces Guetzkow's (1965, p. 550) statement that, "The greater the extent to which an external environment provides multiple bases for the origination of communication, the greater the differentiation of perceptions within the organization."

Whites in the organization added another important dimension: detachment from the emotion of the situation. Blacks could channel the needs of the poor into the organization, whites could apply logic to the situation, which many of the blacks were too personally involved to do.

Finally, we need to look at one other element of structure that affects communication--that of the power of the clientele vis-a-vis

the organization. Thompson (1967, p. 137) states that the preferences of the organization's "dominant coalition" are constrained when the clientele is able to pressure for a policy outcome which the coalition might not prefer. This was evident in the Prince Georges County study. Each federally funded program was advised by a citizen board, and these boards could effectively force inputs upon the organization. Conflict often occurs, but we are trying to facilitate communication across systems, and articulation of conflicting values can be expected to lead to conflict.

Many of these boards represent middle-class blacks rather than the poor, and this blunts the effectiveness of the boards. The problem is that although the need to organize the clientele to pressure the organization is recognized, it is difficult for an organization to organize a group to pressure itself.

A few principles can now be given in summary. Organization-clientele communication should be audited in terms of the learning which the organization does, the extent of understanding or empathy which organization members have with the clientele. If this measure shows inadequate communication, the structure of the organization should be changed. One case of successful structure has been described here. But situations differ and only experimentation can yield the most effective structure.

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